

Covering Wildfire



In Virginia

A GUIDE FOR NEWS MEDIA

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This guide is dedicated to the firefighters throughout Virginia who risk their lives protecting the citizens and Natural Resources of the state and presented as a public service for media in Virginia and other interested organizations by the **Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF)**

For more information, please visit our website at

www.dof.virginia.gov

Introduction to Getting Your Story

Wildfires and other catastrophes are major news events and attract considerable media attention. This is particularly true for those areas in Virginia with smaller markets where stories about wildfire often lead on the news broadcast and make headlines in the local papers. The public definitely has a right to information about such incidents; however, access to incidents is often complicated by the emergency nature of what is going on.

The purpose of this publication is to help you better understand the organization, policies and terminology associated with suppression of significant wildland fires. This information will help you to effectively cover your story thus keeping your audiences better informed. This brochure also introduces you to the major fire organizations in Virginia responsible for the suppression of wildland fires. These agencies invite media coverage. In fact, they recognize that news media coverage of wildland fires is an integral part of keeping the public informed and spreading the wildland fire prevention message. It is our goal to educate you and for you, in turn, to inform and keep informed your audiences. Our biggest concern is that everyone approaches wildland fires safely and in a manner which does not interfere with emergency efforts.

The principles discussed in this booklet apply to all emergency or incident management situations that involve federal, state and local responders operating under what is called the **National Interagency Incident Command System (ICS)**. More on this valuable tool coming up soon. Read on!

Interagency Cooperation

There is no way one agency can respond to all the wildland fires and other emergencies that impact Virginia. Land management and firefighting agencies on many levels of government have worked together under a very carefully coordinated system to respond to emergencies as they arise.

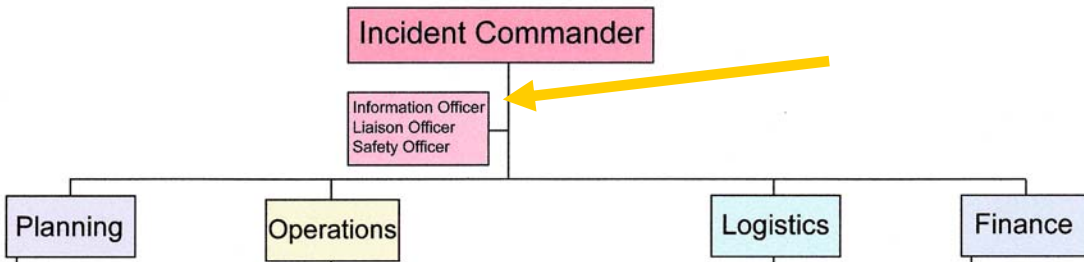
The Incident Command System

The Incident Command System may seem like a confusing mix of bureaucracy, red tape and hurdles, but it's just the opposite. The Incident Command System (ICS) is a standardized, on-scene, all-hazards incident management approach that:

- Allows for the integration of facilities, equipment, personnel, procedures and communications operating within a common organizational structure.
- Enables a coordinated response among various jurisdictions and functional agencies, both public and private.
- Establishes common processes for planning and managing resources.

ICS is flexible and can be used for incidents of any type, scope and complexity. ICS allows its users to adopt an integrated organizational structure to match the complexities and demands of single or multiple incidents. In theory, its management structure builds as the incident builds. If a single person (the Incident Commander) can fulfill all roles on an incident then it's a one-person show; if not, the structure is there to build up.

The Information Officer reports directly to the Incident Commander, who approves ALL information being released from the incident as well as approving access to the incident and incident personnel.



Who to Contact When a Fire Breaks

When a fire occurs in Virginia, the first reaction is to jump in a vehicle and follow the smoke. Sometimes, however, that's not always the best option. For one thing, a smoke column may not be a wildland fire. For another, if it is a wildland fire, you should thoroughly check things out beforehand to make sure you're not running headlong into a dangerous situation. The story is important, but your safety is our primary concern. After all, you can't tell your story from the back of an ambulance, or worse, from the morgue!

So when the wildfire breaks out, follow this quick little checklist before you run:

<p>1. Is it a wildland fire?</p>	<p>Virginia derives much of its economy from agriculture. Farmers found out long ago that the quickest way to break down leftover organic matter after harvest is to burn it. As the season gets later, agriculture fires (commonly called "ag burns") become more common. <i>These fires are generally well contained and burn out within a short time.</i></p> <p>Maybe it's a Prescribed Fire, used to approximate the natural vegetative disturbance of periodic fire occurrence. This vegetative management tool is used to maintain fire dependent ecosystems and restore those outside their natural balance. Generally, low-intensity prescribed fire is applied by trained experts to clear ground of dangerous fuels, such as dead wood and brush. This low-intensity fire is vital to the life cycles of fire-dependent range and forestlands.</p>
<p>2. It's a wildland fire! Who do I call?</p>	<p>If it is a wildfire and you're the first person to see it, report it by calling 911. Do this first before attempting to "get the story." Any delay in response maybe critical.</p>
<p>3. Who's my main source for information on the fire?</p>	<p>If it's already been reported and the Virginia Department of Forestry and/or Fire Department have responded to it, the next person you want to talk to is the Incident Commander or Information Officer. Seek this person out on scene or contact the nearest Department of Forestry office for information and guidance. A list of contacts can be found online at www.dof.virginia.gov/info/vdof-directory.htm</p>
<p>5. What if an Information Officer is not available? What next?</p>	<p>In the unlikely event that an Information Officer or someone filling that role is unavailable, information will be available through the Incident Commander. The Incident Commander manages all aspects of a fire, including</p>

Continued What if an Information Officer is not available? What next?	tracking firefighters; the fire's growth or movement, and requesting additional resources. However, you can imagine that this is a busy person! If the IC is unavailable at the moment to talk about the fire, you can bet an Information Officer is not far away.
6. Is there any way I can help?	Occasionally, the Information Officer or the IC may request that the news media help with sending out information the public needs to know. Frequently the public, curious about all the excitement, will venture close to the fire lines for a better look. Often the added traffic can block engine access to the fire, or nearby cars may reduce a plane's ability to drop retardant from the air. The media play a very important role as an information resource to help local residents stay informed... AND SAFE.

Bottom line:

The Fire Information Officer, Public Information Officer, Information Officer or whatever you call them are there to help you get the best story you can. Sometimes they may limit your access to the fire because of safety reasons, but for the most part, they are there to help you avoid the "run-around." They may escort you to the scene of the fire, and can also help arrange interviews with firefighters and the Incident Commander. The Information Officer should always be your "first call" person when a fire breaks.

How to Get to the Fire Line!

There is one overall rule for covering wildland fire stories: **SAFETY FIRST!**

As a common sense rule, nothing will be allowed to jeopardize the safety of the news media or those involved with suppression activities. The Fire Information Officer will explain to you the rationale for any specific access restrictions.

General Policy

- It is the policy of the Virginia Department of Forestry to provide news media access to incidents, such as wildland fires and prescribed fires.
- Federal and state agencies are required to provide equitable and maximum news media access to wildland fire incidents.
- For the purposes of these guidelines, news media representatives include print and broadcast reporters; freelance print reporters; freelance videographers, and photographers.
- While the wildland firefighting agencies seek to provide safe access to incidents for news media representatives, the ultimate responsibility for their safety lies with the individual reporter and his/her employer.

Guidelines

Access

- Visits to the fireline must receive the approval of the incident commander or designated representative.
- News media will be escorted by a person qualified as a single resource boss or other appropriate escort approved by the incident commander. The incident commander may

delegate escort approval authority to other incident personnel, such as the lead Information Officer or appropriate local authority.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

- News media representatives will be required to wear PPE as outlined in the Fireline Handbook and the Interagency Standards for Fire and Aviation Operations (the “Red Book”) when working **within** the fire perimeter, and have an appropriate safety briefing. PPE must meet National Fire Protection Association/National Wildfire Coordinating Group standards. The required PPE is:

- ☐ 8-inch-high, lace-type work boots with non-slip, melt-resistant soles and heels
- ☐ Nomex fire shirt
- ☐ Nomex trousers
- ☐ Hard hat with chinstrap
- ☐ Leather gloves
- ☐ Fire shelter

PPE **may be** provided by the fire organization if media representatives are unprepared.

Many times you will be able to get your story without going within the fire perimeter and, in those situations, the required Personal Protective Equipment requirements will be minimal.

“Shadowing” Fire Crews

- Incident personnel will facilitate in-depth coverage opportunities for journalists. News media representatives requesting to “shadow” crews for more than one operational period on the fireline or in the fire area must:

- Wear personal protective equipment and understand how to use it.
- Coordinate activities with the lead Information Officer, who will communicate with the affected crew boss, incident commander and the fire management officer at the crew’s home unit.

- It is strongly recommended that reporters requesting to shadow crews complete basic firefighter training, including S-130 and S-190. If these courses have been taken in a previous year, a current refresher course is recommended. News media representatives must be able to walk in difficult terrain and be in good physical condition, with no known limitations.

If you want to go out to the fireline, you'll be advised of the danger. You will be discouraged from going off by yourself. In some locations, the Fire Information Officer or other responsible official will escort you to the line. Usually, there are always areas you can safely go and see the action. Denial of access is usually the exception, though, and not the rule.

Here are some other things to consider before going out to the fireline:

1. **Location.** Access to wildland fires in Virginia can be easy or difficult, depending on the location and availability of access roads. In some remote locations, access by non-emergency personnel may be limited to foot travel or four-wheel drive. Some wilderness locations do not allow motorized access at all. The key to finding the fire is by getting in contact with the Information Officer before you start chasing smoke columns.

2. **Personal Protective Equipment.** All firefighters are required to wear personal protective equipment while out on the line. You are no different. Most of today's synthetic clothes are not fire retardant, and some may actually be harmful to you if a fire got too close to you. Likewise, some hairsprays and makeup may be **flammable** if you got in close proximity to a fire.

Again, SAFETY FIRST!

How About a Plane or Helicopter Ride?

One question that is frequently asked is "Can we get a ride up in one of your planes or helicopters for some aerial shots?" The answer is **NO** – by Federal regulation only persons who are essential for the mission are allowed on these flights.

On rare occasions a media flight will be organized to allow reporters to view fires. Seating on these flights is limited and will be divided among representatives of various media groups. Your best way of getting aerial coverage is to contract a local charter service or flight operation. This method also has limitations, as airspace may be restricted in the area around and approaching the fire for safety reasons. Any aerial access to a fire must be cleared in advance. (Talk to your pilot about FAA flight restrictions under 91.137a.) Pre-approved flyovers can usually be arranged, but they must be coordinated with the Incident Commander first. This is something the Fire Information Officer can help you in arranging. He or she will coordinate your flight with the IC and Air Operations.



Other Parts to the Story

There are numerous angles to follow when reporting a wildland fire beyond the simple facts of the fire. Here are some ideas:



Detection. While many fires are reported through the 911 system, there are times when aerial detection is utilized. After a lightning storm passes and conditions are dry and susceptible to lightning caused wildfires an aerial flight maybe utilized to check for fire starts.

Logistics. Getting people and resources to a fire is no easy task. Fires can break any time, day or night, and VDOF uses various people to get equipment and fire-fighters to the scene. Their work continues even after the fires are "out" to get people and equipment home and the bills paid.

Planning. The Planning Section of the fire collects and evaluates the latest information on the fire; evaluates suppression strategies and shift plans, and distributes information on the fire to other sections of the Incident Command System.



Rehabilitation. Now that the fire's out, what next? There may be many reasons we would choose to rehabilitate a burned area: to reduce wind erosion; to prevent the invasion of noxious weeds, or to prevent damage to water quality, among others. Rehabilitation can include reseeding an area with native or non-native vegetation; smoothing or removing berms in fire line roads; protecting stream channels and soils, or other activities. A team of specialists from the local forestry department is usually assigned after a fire to determine what rehabilitation, if any, needs to be done. Sometimes, the plan is developed and implemented while the fire is still burning.



- **Fire Prevention.** The Virginia Department of Forestry has had a very active Fire Prevention program, especially in locations outside cities and towns near public lands. Many serious wildland fires are caused by the careless acts of people. The news media are especially valuable in making the public aware of potentially dangerous fire situations; the conditions that contribute to wildland fires, and what can be done to prevent fires.

Causes of Wildland Fires

Forest fires, also called wildfires or outdoor fires, occur in Virginia on average about 1,200 times per year. These fires burn an average of 12,000 acres. People may be injured or killed, buildings are destroyed, and significant damage to the forest and environment occurs.

The Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF) is responsible for the control of forest fires in counties and some cities. Fire departments, forest industry and many volunteers work together with the VDOF wardens to save lives, property and forest resources. Forest wardens investigate all forest fires to find the person responsible; collect suppression costs, or issue a summons to court for forest fire law violations.

Records indicate that people cause most of Virginia's wildfires. Virginia is growing more rapidly than many other states, and its population has doubled in the last 45 years. People are moving into residential developments in forested areas, and there is increased recreational use of the forest.

All this increases the risk of wildfires and requires continued fire prevention and protection activities.

In any given year, the number of fires and the cause of those fires changes as they are directly influenced by environmental conditions. The following table indicates the historic average of number of fires by cause for an “average” year

Virginia Fire Causes and their percentages

Cause	Percent
Open Burning	30
Arson	20
Smokers	14
Misc. (house, vehicle, aircraft, etc. that spread to the forest)	11
Children	9
Equipment Use	7
Railroads	5
Lightning	3
Campfires	1

Accurate origin & cause determination is an essential first step in a successful fire investigation, and successful fire investigations are necessary in preventing unwanted wildfires. Proper investigative procedures, which occur with initial attack, can more accurately pinpoint fire causes and can preserve valuable evidence that might otherwise be destroyed by suppression activities. If the fire is human-caused, the protective measures can preserve evidence that may lead to effective and fair administrative, civil or criminal actions.

The investigation must start at the time a fire is reported or discovered. First responders play an important role in protecting evidence, so it is important for the origin and cause investigator to help train all first responders to identify and protect the area of origin of the fire.

The Virginia Department of Forestry is required to investigate each wildfire to determine the cause and responsible party. If necessary, this will facilitate the recovery of the cost of suppressing the wildfire.

Virginia's Forest Fire Laws

In Virginia, most forest fires are the result of human actions, and can be prevented by using common sense; following fire safety rules, and obeying fire laws.

Virginia's forest fire laws are designed – and have been successful over the years – in protecting the forest resources of the Commonwealth. The Department of Forestry's Special Forest Wardens, commissioned by the Governor, enforce these fire laws. These laws address fire issues, such as liability for escaped fires; responsibility for unattended fires near flammable material; failure to take proper care and precaution when burning, and various statutes pertinent to maliciously and intentionally set fires. The 4PM Burning Law has historically served as a successful fire prevention tool in protecting Virginia's forest resources as evidenced by the state's low fire occurrence as compared to other southern states.

There are several laws that deal with wildfires, the most common are identified below.

- Cost Recovery for Fire Protection § [10.1-1141](#) Liability and recovery of cost of fighting forest fires
- 4 p.m. Burning Law § [10.1-1142](#) Regulating the burning of woods, brush, etc.; penalties l [Exemption from the 4 p.m. Burning Law](#).
- Throwing flammable objects from vehicle on highway while in or near certain lands § [10.1-1143](#)
- Rewards for information leading to conviction of arsonists or incendiaries § [10.1-1138](#)
- Serious Fire Hazards § [10.1-1158](#)

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How are wildfires put out?

A: You need three things to keep a fire going: fuel, oxygen and heat. The total fire suppression effort removes one or more of these necessary ingredients. For example, fire lines remove vegetation - a fire's access to fuel. The fire is sometimes smothered in dirt to remove its oxygen supply. Water and retardant may be used to cool flames and remove heat.

Q: What's the difference between "containment" of a fire and "Controlling" a fire?

A: A fire is not considered "controlled" until it's all the way out. Until then, firefighters work toward "containing" the fire. Here's one way to think of it: Think of a container -- say, a mason jar. A fire is contained when it's all "bottled in," like in a container. The fire may still be burning, but if a distinct fire line is built around the entire perimeter so that there is no chance for the fire to escape or spot over outside the line, then the firefighters declare the fire "contained."

After containing the fire, the next step is to get it under control -- that is, make sure it is **dead out** -- no hot spots, no floating embers, nothing that will flare up again if a breeze should come along.

Q: What is the difference between a "prescribed fire" and a "wildfire?"

A: A *wildfire* is an unplanned or unwanted fire. Such a fire may be a threat to resources, structures or people. Despite the cause, these fires are suppressed using strategies and tactics appropriate to the threat. A *prescribed fire* is one that is started intentionally by qualified, trained personnel. There are many reasons why the government would choose to start a fire intentionally, such as reducing the number of large, old trees to give ground vegetation a chance to grow and improve habitat for wildlife. Another reason may be to reduce the amount of fuel that would otherwise burn in a large, catastrophic wildfire. Like a doctor's prescription, there are specific conditions that must be met before a prescribed fire is started, including favorable temperatures, low winds and optimum humidity. Other precautions also include a well-defined containment area to minimize the possibility of the fire escaping. Even if most of these conditions are in place, the supervisors in charge of igniting the fire may stop the ignition for a variety of reasons: if they determine that weather conditions are too unstable; that the lines are not sufficiently defined; if enough firefighting equipment and people are not available; if there is a threat to public or firefighter safety, or for many other reasons. If these conditions are not in place, just as if the doctor's prescription is not followed carefully, the "remedy" may prove just as harmful as the problem.

Q: What is "mop-up?"

A: Once the fire stops its spread, firefighters begin the task of mop-up. This involves extinguishing, cooling or removing burning material along or near the control line to reduce further spread of the fire.

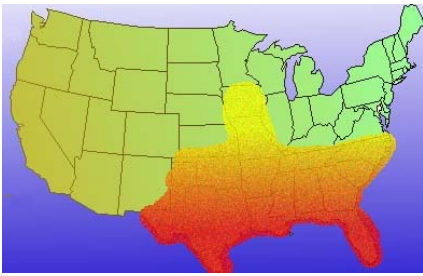
Fire Season

Fire "season" in Virginia peaks traditionally in the Spring and again during the Fall of each year. The Spring season normally starts in the middle part of February and continues through the end of April. Our Fall season runs from the middle of October till early December. Fires can and do occur throughout the year, not just during these peak fire seasons. Should the weather turn very hot and dry in the Summer, we may have numerous fires during a time which fire activity normally is at a low.

Please go to the following website for more information.

www.crh.noaa.gov/pub/firepeak.htm

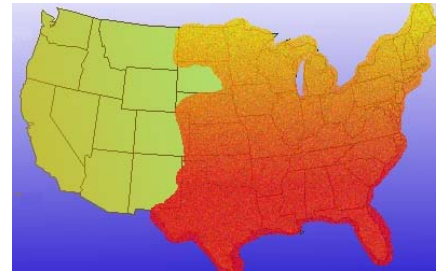
The orange/red coloring on the maps indicates the areas of the country that are in "fire season" for the specific months identified.



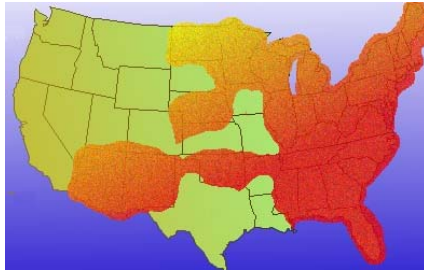
FEBRUARY



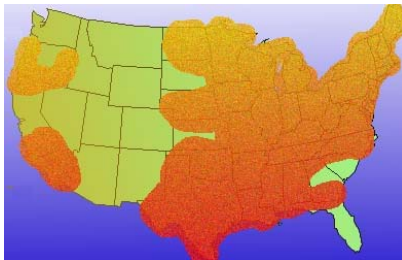
MARCH



APRIL



MAY



OCTOBER



NOVEMBER



DECEMBER

Key Definitions

- **Air Tanker** – A large, fixed-wing aircraft capable of delivering nearly 2,000 gallons of water or retardant on a fire in a bombing fashion.
- **Backfire (or Backburn)** - A fire set along the inner edge of a control line to consume the fuel in the path of a wildland fire, and/or to change the direction of force on the fire's "convection column."
- **Blow-Up** – A sudden increase in fire activity or rate of spread sufficient to preclude direct control or upset existing control plans. Often accompanied by a violent convection and may have other characteristics of a firestorm.
- **Burning Out** - Setting backfires on a small scale and with closer control, in order to consume patches of unburned fuel and aid in construction of control lines.
- **Closed Area** - An area in which specific activities - or even entry - is temporarily restricted to reduce the risk of fires caused by people.
- **Closure** - Legal restriction of specific activities, such as smoking, camping or entry into an area.

- **Confine a fire** - To restrict a fire within determined boundaries established either prior to or during a fire.
- **Contain a fire** - To take suppression action, as needed, which can reasonably be expected to check the fire's spread under prevailing conditions. In short, to "bottle in a fire."
- **Control a fire** - To complete a control line around a fire, any spot fires and any interior islands to be saved. Also, to burn out any unburned areas adjacent to the fire sides of the control lines, and to cool down all "hotspots" that are immediate threats to the control line so that the control line can be expected to hold under any foreseeable conditions.
- **Crew** – An organized group of firefighters under the leadership of a crew boss or other designated official.
- **Crown Fire** – A fire which burns in tree tops (going from tree top to tree top), and which burns all or a large part of the upper branches and foliage of the trees.
- **Drought Index**- Also referred to as KBDI or CSI, a measure of how dry the ground moisture is. The scale goes from 0 to 800 with 0 being complete ground saturation and 800 being desert-like conditions.
- **Engine**- Any ground vehicle providing specified levels of water pumping capabilities.
- **Escaped fire** - A fire that has exceeded initial attack capabilities and is spreading.
- **Fireline** – A break in the fuel, used to stop the spread of the fire.
- **Fire Shelter** - A personal protection item carried by firefighters which, when deployed, unfolds to form a tent-like shelter of heat reflective materials.
- **Fuel Type** – Refers to the type of vegetation in which a fire is burning. Used in predicting fire behavior and determining effects of a fire.
- **Initial Attack** – The control efforts undertaken by firefighters who are first to arrive at the incident.
- **Lead Plane** – A plane used to guide other aircraft, usually air tankers, to the "drop" location.
- **Prescribed Burn** - Controlled application of fire to wildland fuels, under specified environmental and weather conditions, to produce a fire that is confined to a pre-determined area. The reason for such burning is to produce the intensity of heat and rate of spread required to attain a planned resource management objective, such as reducing the amount of old, dead logging slash that might fuel a major wildland fire.
- **Resources** - All personnel and major items of equipment available, or potentially available, for assignment to a fire incident.
- **Slop Over** – A fire which has breached the fireline.
- **Spot Fire** - Unwanted fire that occurs outside the perimeter of the main fire, caused by flying sparks or embers. Usually some distance beyond the fireline.
- **Strike Team** – Specified combinations of the same kind and type of resources, with common communications and a leader.
- **S.E.A.T.S** – Single Engine Air Tanker (s) A smaller version of the Air Tanker, this carries up to 200 gallons of water.
- **Torching** – A tree that suddenly erupts into flames from the base to the top.
- **Wildfire** - Any fire occurring on wildland, except a fire that is under prescription.
- **Wildland** - An area in which development is essentially non-existent, except for roads, railroads, power lines and similar transportation or utility structures.

Additional terms not listed here can be found at the following site.

National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) Glossary of Wildland Fire Terminology

<http://www.nwcg.gov/pms/pubs/glossary/index.htm>

Miscellaneous Information

National Fire Season Themes

1. Safety of the public and firefighters is the top consideration in fire and aviation management.

- Public and firefighter safety is our highest priority.
- Firefighters always make safety their top concern.
- No structure, or natural or cultural resource, is worth taking an unneeded risk.
- Structures can be rebuilt and natural resources generally come back in time. A life cannot be replaced.

2. Fires are managed in different ways.

- More than one strategy can be used during a wildfire. The strategies may range from quickly putting out the wildfire to monitoring a wildfire benefiting the land.
- When a wildfire threatens people, homes or important natural or cultural resources, it will be put out as quickly and efficiently as possible, without compromising safety.
- Ecosystems in the United States evolved with wildfire. Wildfire is essential to most ecosystems' health and resilience.

3. Firefighters count on you to do your part.

- Thousands of communities are located in fire-prone areas. Residents must take action to adapt their communities to fire. These actions will protect their homes and improve the safety of the public and firefighters.
- Wildland firefighters are not responsible for clearing brush, trees and other flammable material away from your house. That's the responsibility of property owners.

4. Fire seasons are expected to become longer and more difficult.

- The last three fire seasons have been lighter than usual, but firefighters know that the trend will change. Wildfires occur throughout the year in various parts of the country.

- Climate change is a factor in the changing fire season. Although the United States had a generally cool year in 2010, other parts of the world experienced record temperatures and dryness. Other factors leading to more difficult seasons include an overabundance of flammable plants and trees and construction in fire-prone areas.

5. Teamwork is essential in wildland fire.

- Wildland fire knows no boundaries. Local, state, tribal and federal firefighters all work together to manage wildfires.
- Pooling our strengths and resources helps us to be more effective and keeps our costs down.

Websites of Interest

View a daily report of wildfire activity in Virginia. Previous day's activity is posted by 10:00 AM each day.
<http://www.dof.virginia.gov/fire/sit-rep.shtml>

The Nation's Logistical Support Center
<http://www.nifc.gov/>

Special area of interest Welcome to the PIO Bulletin Board http://www.nifc.gov/PIO_bb.html

InciWeb is an interagency all-risk incident information management system. The system was developed with two primary missions: 1)Provide the public a single source of incident related information and 2)Provide a standardized reporting tool for the Public Affairs community

<http://www.incweb.org/>

Google based Map Wildfires in Virginia As significant wildfires are reported the location and a brief intel will be posted.
http://maps.google.com/maps?ie=UTF-8&rlz=1T4SUNA_enUS298US298&hl=en&tab=w1

Information targeting Communities and Homeowners on how to make their homes and community Firewise!

The National Site <http://www.firewise.org/>

The State Site <http://www.dof.virginia.gov/fire/firewise-index.htm> or www.firewisevirginia.org

Contact Information

Area Department of Forestry Contact: _____

Area Department of Forestry Contact: _____

Regional Office of the Virginia Department of Forestry _____

Virginia Department of Forestry Central Office Contacts:

Director of Resource Protection; John Miller john.miller@dof.virginia.gov 434-220-9023

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